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Reviews and Discussion

Paul Bouissac. Circus and Culture: A Semiotic Approach. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976.

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Is circus a form of communication? Does it offer a message on top of entertainment? Is it a language? Does it use one or several semiotic codes which are decoded by the audience? Is it possible to insert the circus, as a system of signs, in the larger network of signs which define our culture? Paul Bouissac answers all these questions with a resounding YES, then expands his answer in an extraordinary collection of essays, which despite some disparity, manage to add up to an integrated whole. In fact, they are arranged like individual circus acts in the circus program: each deals with a different area—acrobats, "comedy horse," jugglers and magicians, lions and tigers, wild horses, clowns—but all have a common message, to wit: circus must be approached semiotically. And just as circus acts form a harmonious and stable pattern, so the various approaches used by Bouissac under the umbrella of semiotics complement each other quite convincingly.

The entire book must then be judged on two levels. Does it tell us something interesting and/or new about the circus? And does it expand our appreciation of semiotics as a tool for the analysis of cultural phenomena which, like the circus, stress a public performance? There is little doubt about the first question. Bouissac's essays have been hailed as the first significant breakthrough in what used to be only a descriptive and historical/anecdotal account of circuses, and this general admiration is well deserved. Bouissac had the experience of running a circus himself, as many others had; he has been trained in linguistics, anthropology, and structuralism, as have many others; but the combination is indeed unique. The average semiotician, when he leaves the safe academic fields with which he is familiar, must deal with secondhand material and, however brilliant his presentation, always risks being countered on factual grounds. In Bouissac's case, theory and praxis go together. As a result, no one, after reading his book, will see circus with the same eyes as before. Of course, if one liked the "magic" and the "wonder" of the big top, the enlightenment provided by Bouissac will result in a feeling of loss. But the passing of the world of make-believe is more than compensated for by an initiation to semiotic processes underpinning the illusions. An adult can now return to the circus in a spirit of eager exploration: to check on Bouissac, and perhaps to add to his findings.

Since circus is a form of communication, Bouissac's preferred model is linguistic. In any circus act, and in complete programs, he detects the operation of the "double articulation," i.e., the use of a finite number of signs in a way that generates an infinite number of meanings. In that sense, circus is (or has) a language with multimedia signs of a visual, auditive, and even olfactory nature. Separately, they have no fixed meaning, but their various combinations produce specific messages. For example, the same acrobatic feat performed by an artist dressed in a "brightly colored leotard" will classify him as a superman and evoke "anxiety and admiration," ultimately referring to "survival through biological superiority," whereas performed by an artist "dressed as a tramp," it will provoke "laughter" and refer to "survival through chance" (p. 19). Furthermore, like the Russian folktales studied by Propp, circus acts and programs have a grammar: a stable succession of stages—from the identification of the performer, through a series of tests, to public acknowledgment of his triumph—a pattern which may be (purposely) disturbed but eventually goes back to its expected progression. Within this pattern, however, performers (and/or circus owners/managers) present individual *speech acts* which, says Bouissac, are never the same except by rare intentionality (p. 23). They address a message to the audience, and the fact that it is appreciated, and hence understood, "presupposes that the receiver shares with the sender a knowledge of a system of rules" (p. 14), i.e., a general circus *code,* made up of various *subcodes* corresponding to types of circus signs: linguistic, behavioral, musical, technical, along with those involving costumes, lighting, accessories, and so on.

While this general model raises a theoretical question (see below), its application to concrete types of acts yields unquestionably seminal results, though not always of equal interest or equal faithfulness to the model. Thus the analysis of acrobatic acts applies mainly to cybernetic concepts leading to a kinematic representation of transformations. Bouissac follows Ashby on stable equilibrium, instability, and disturbance, and ends with formulas accounting for ways in which an acrobat creates and corrects/controls a disturbance in his state of equilibrium: a technical notation of a rather obvious slow-motion description of the act. At this point semiotics intervene to qualify the technical behaviors as *signifiers* which (with other surrounding signifiers) relate to *signified* aptitudes for survival. Hence, as mentioned above, the real acrobat refers to biological superiority and the clown to biological inferiority. All this seems correct, but hardly new: we always knew that we laughed at clowns because they appeared inferior (and often flat on the ground) and admired acrobats because they appeared superior (way up there). No need for a semiotic approach here.

The essay on the performing horse is more revealing and controversial. Bouissac says the act contains two separate communications, each with its own code: one between the trainer and the horse, the other between the two performers and the audience. One may ask: does animal training, based on the principle of a "conditioned reflex" (p. 56), qualify as communication, and does the stimulus, with its one-to-one automatic response, qualify as a sign? Or even as a "signal"? Can one speak of communication without some semiotic intentionality and/or consciousness on both sides? If I have conditioned the horse to nod when my hand moves slightly toward its ear, do I view my gesture as a *sign* which the horse understands because we share a semiotic *code,* or as a triggering step in a mechanical sequence comparable to turning the key to start a car? A well-trained horse has no choice but to give the expected response, but interhuman communication always entails a degree of uncertainty as to a correct understanding and, *a fortiori,* the resulting response. Of course, one may argue that this uncertainty (this choice) only means that we have not learned our codes well enough, that, in a perfect society, all communication would be conditioned. Perhaps. I suspect that the study of communication, and its very notion, would then disappear. Bouissac's description of the conditioning which goes into the horse act is fascinating, but really belongs neither with communication nor with cultural semiotics (though perhaps with natural semiotics, which study relations between, say, volcano smoke and eruption, or thermometer reading and fever). On the other hand, if that conditioning were to be assimilated to the conditioning of an acrobat or a juggler, and the horse viewed as a prop over which the trainer has control, Bouissac's analysis of the act as communication between the performer and the audience would still retain all its startling pertinence: we could still receive the message that man's superiority over animals can be reversed, especially when the horse appears to be more intelligent than the trainer; and we could still laugh at the latter while admiring his skill.

Not all acts however refer to biological differences. Jugglers and magicians, according to Bouissac, subvert the Western belief in the manual production of goods, since prestidigitation evokes a production without any real work, and juggling represents work without any real production. This is why, Bouissac says, magicians produce items related to economic activity (weaving, gardening, animal breeding: handkerchiefs, flowers, rabbits) and jugglers juggle useless objects or objects associated with the leisure class (cigar boxes, bowling pins, billiard balls). In turn, the "cat act" (lions, tigers) is compared to a text where the "heroes" are modified by names, costumes, behavior patterns, and the "villains" by their species, size, props. The text is narratively segmented by ritual bows of the tamer, and articulated by a poetic structure, which, in its "realistic" style, works with metonymy—i.e., danger by contiguity (as when a lion is forced to jump through an ignited hoop)—and reaches "poetry" by the means of metaphors—i.e., anthropomorphic similes (as when a lioness kisses the tamer). In still another essay, treatment of animals in zoos and circuses is differentiated as referring respectively to a mythical and ritual attitude; by stressing the ritual uniqueness through repetition, circus is said to restore the continuity of life. The wild-horses act, through the iconization of animals, expresses on the contrary various semantic tensions between social and antisocial behavior, freedom and servitude, order and transgression . . . and so on. The arguments vary, but all point to a deep connection between the message of the act and the contextual culture.

The vitality and success of the circus, according to Bouissac, do not lie in any "passive enjoyment" but in these culturally determined and shared messages. This conclusion takes us back to the theoretical question raised by Bouissac's model. Indeed, most of his demonstrations are quite convincing, but rely almost exclusively on what I shall call "secondary" circus signs (costumes, music, gestures, lights, props), which accompany the "primary" sign (technical behavior). Clowns are an exception to this rule, but then Bouissac himself views the clowning act as quite exceptional. In most other cases, the message is conveyed by the secondary signs. When a dog pushes a baby carriage, *he* is indeed humanized and serves to "restore a biological continuity denied by the contextual culture" (p. 121), perhaps evoking laughter. But the "primary" interest of the trick lies in the technical behavior: a type of walk that dogs normally cannot perform (the humanlike erect position is only serendipitous). The question is: what about the "primary" sign, if indeed it is a sign? Is the technical behavior a form of communication? Does it convey a message? Or does it satisfy only a single need, being consumed in the process? Let us compare the enjoyment of a circus act with the enjoyment of a gourmet meal served in a restaurant reputed for its cuisine. Now, like the circus, gourmet meals also have a "double articulation" at work in individual types of dishes and the total meal: they too follow a traditional sequence (appetizers, fish, meat, etc.) and bring variations to each type of dish (there are no two identical Dover soles). Furthermore, they also have secondary messages aimed at the cultural context (from ethnic values up to patriotic allusions and down to low comedy, as with the "cassoulet"). And then there are the right and wrong wines, with all their literature. In that sense, gourmet meals may and should be viewed as a form of communication to be studied semiotically (we are applying for a grant). But, in the primary sense, the gourmet meal remains an experience for the mouth, the eye, and the nose, appreciated for its own sake and not for its messages. More specifically, it is appreciated for its "quality," which means a culinary performance whereby (skill/art overcoming difficulty) the meal offers a positive difference from the normal meal. Normality and appreciation of the difference are cultur-

ally determined, but the desire for the performance, and its appreciation, appear to be universal. In fact, aren't the same desire and appreciation at work when we pay to applaud an acrobat, a juggler, or a lion tamer, who (art/skill overcoming difficulty) performs acts beyond our normal powers? In semiotic terms, any such performance, and all of them, may still be considered a sign, but autotelic, almost totally collapsed on itself, drawing attention to its signifier—i.e., what we see, hear, or taste. The signified only specifies that the particular signifier is indeed a performance—i.e., positively different in degree from normality. And the referent is that performance—i.e., the sign, i.e., mainly the signifier. Any other referential messages will come from the outside and through secondary signs. But then, isn't the primary sign at the center of circus? By means of costumes, varied messages can be grafted on the acrobatic act, which starts with the performance; without the performance, there would be no circus, only theater or pantomime. And again: does one communicate a performance?

The questions raised by the circus prompt interest in other types of public "shows" which value performances and hence draw attention to the signifier. One could attempt to order them within that perspective. In theater, for example, despite some stress on the performance—quality of acting, beauty of a face or figure, harmony or extravaganza of sets—the referential function of secondary signs dominates to the point that they are generally viewed as primary, and priority is given to the text. A one-person act, on the other hand, although it may use referential material, is mainly appreciated for the performance—not for the content of jokes but for the manner of their telling. The circus operates like a many-people show: it stresses the performance but also conveys messages. Bouissac's book shows that these are subtle and concerted, and powerfully grounded in our culture. I am not sure, however, whether they really account for the success of the circus, or whether they play second fiddle to the sheer enjoyment of the performance.

Michael Greenhalgh and Vincent Megaw, eds. Art in Society: Studies in Style, Culture, and Aesthetics. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978, xiii + 350 pp. (cloth).

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As befits a publication on art this is a handsome book, with an attractive print layout, sprinkled with photographs, drawings, and graphs, firmly bound, and appropriately heavy but compact in the hand. How it weighs in as a contribution to the subject cannot be stated as a simple sum of its parts, for a few brilliant sections outweigh the whole.

The title sweeps across a wide intellectual horizon, but in fact the twenty-two essays stay neatly within the bounds of art studied by anthropologists; that is, they concentrate on small-scale societies, living, dead, or dying. The contributions stem from a symposium on art and society, sponsored by the editors, held at Leicester University in early 1975, with the addition of three papers, all but one drawn from British backgrounds.

Few anthropologists focus their primary effort on visual art in the same way they might on ritual or oral tradition, and fewer art historians concentrate on the art of exotic peoples. The result is that ethnoart is a bit of everybody's business, and the inevitable resulting miscellany shows up clearly in this kind of book, which lacks a specific theme or regional focus and includes a philosopher, art historians, archaeologists, social anthropologists, museum ethnographers, and practicing artists who are teachers or collectors.

The resulting range of viewpoints and topics may give this book, as the cover claims, a wide appeal, but their juxtaposition and the ensuing seesawing quality can induce vertigo even in a tolerant reader. The extremes in levels of expression and research caliber that characterize this compendium are illustrated by the first two selections. Philosopher of aesthetics Richard Wollheim offers a worthy if obscurely abstract admonition that gleams with fashionable terms as he dismisses the taxonomic or distinctive feature approach in favor of the "generative," for the proper analysis of art works. This is followed by the trivial statements of Michael Cardew, the potter who served as a craft development teacher in Nigeria, to the effect that preliterate art is comparable to the art of children and that "others" do not have our habit of conceptual thinking. The entire first section, with nine essays on appreciation and aesthetics—none longer than five pages—resembles a slightly awry Hungarian cake with several dark tasty layers interspersed with light, airy ones. The remaining longer articles are loosely grouped under two headings: Methodology and Stylistic Analysis (six pieces) and Some Ethnographic Samples